

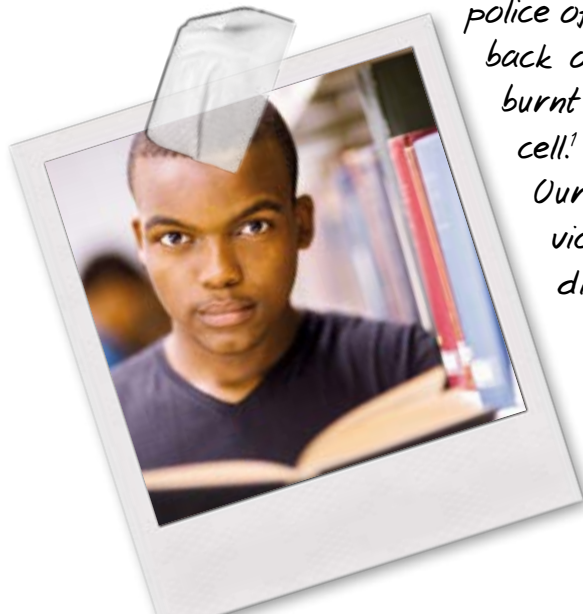
# Understanding intersectional discrimination: the situation of young black men

by Iyiola Solanke

*Why did Michael Brown die? An autopsy report confirmed that this unarmed African-American teenager was shot at least six times, two in the head, by a white police officer. He was neither under arrest nor committing any crime – he was walking down the street when he lost his life. While there may have been a legitimate reason for the officer to stop him, there is no legitimate reason that can justify the officer shooting him to death. Sadly, Michael Brown is just the latest in a long list of young black men around the world who have died during interaction with the police – others include Mark Duggan in the UK and Oury Jalloh in Germany. Mark Duggan was shot by a*



*police officer as he sat in the back of a car; Oury Jalloh burnt to death in a police cell.<sup>1</sup> Michael, Mark and Oury can be described as victims of intersectional discrimination.*



“Intersectional” discrimination is the phrase used to refer to the idea, first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>2</sup> that a person can suffer discrimination due to a mixture of attributes that are intertwined in a way that makes them inseparable. She and other critical race feminists argue that black women suffer a particular form of discrimination due to the interaction of race and gender.<sup>3</sup> Other groups can also suffer from intersectional discrimination if they are a) unable to choose which attribute places them at a disadvantage and if b) the intersection of the attributes creates a ground of discrimination with a unique dynamic.

The quality of intersectional discrimination can be understood by analogy with the synergy that occurs when natural elements are put together: just as tin and copper interact to make bronze (not “tin-per”), age, race and gender combine to create a unique discriminatory dynamic suffered by young black men. Michael, Mark and Oury died not just because of their race, or their age or their gender but because all of these attributes when combined create a figure of fear that is vilified and demonised by society in a way not experienced by all black people, all men or all young people.

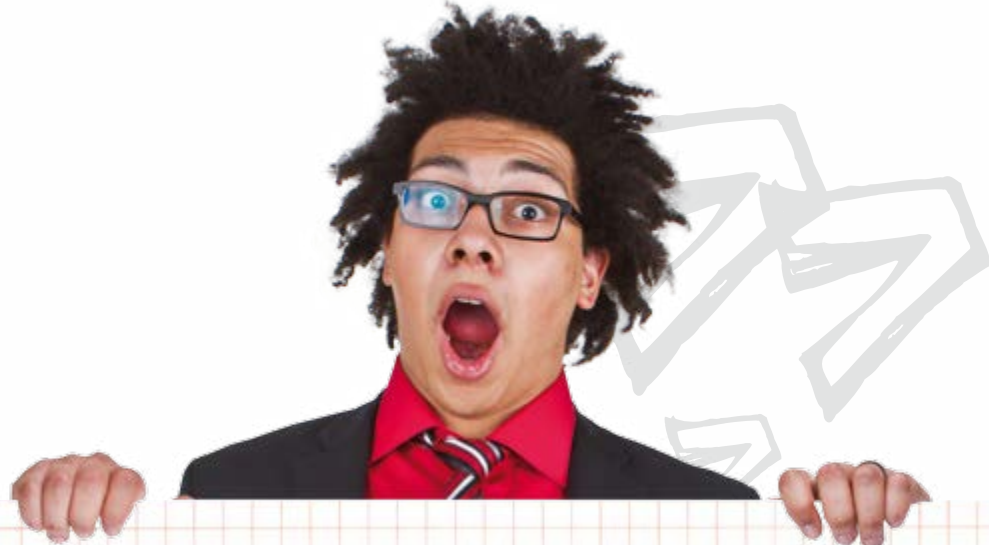
Young black men are an intersectional group, created at the nexus of these attributes, that suffers a special type of discrimination in society because they are subject to a particular kind of stigma.

What is “stigma”? Stigma does not refer to individual attitudes but focuses on social meanings that are attached to arbitrary attributes, such as skin colour, sexual orientation or disability. The first major study of stigma was conducted by social psychologist Erwin Goffman – he defines stigma as “a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype”.<sup>4</sup> Stigma is always negative – it is used for social control. Stigmas develop over time: most are taboos and myths that develop over time and are thus almost invisible, difficult to identify and challenge. These “myths and stereotypes do much of their damage subconsciously. They seep into the inner psyche and take up residence... they’re insidious. They’re sneaky. They have had centuries to sink in.”<sup>5</sup> Stigma is not just name-calling. Being stigmatised means being locked out of the norm and being stripped of dignity and humanity. Discrimination works together with stigma – stigma provides a reason to withhold equal treatment and subject a person to discrimination.

1. For more details on these and other deaths see <http://blackexperienceofpolicing.org/>  
 2. Crenshaw, 1989  
 3. Solanke, 2009  
 4. Goffman, 1990, p.14  
 5. Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p.11.



## Understanding intersectional discrimination: the situation of young black men



Young black men are stigmatised in many ways, by politicians, the general media as well as the police. During his last year as British Prime Minister, Tony Blair was sharply criticised for suggesting that the knife and gun crime causing the deaths of many young black men in Britain was part of a distinctive black culture.<sup>6</sup> Beyond politics, the media presents black men as uneducated, violent, hyper-heterosexual criminals and drug runners – failures in need of discipline who make no positive contribution to their families or society. The police in the UK contribute to this social image by stopping young black men to conduct street searches up to 28 times more than young white men. Data in the UK and USA shows that black males were often stopped simply because they were young black males. American and European society is wary of black males of any age – the stigma attached to this combination of race, gender and age causes society to assume the worst of this group and overreact in interaction with them. Some young black men take to whistling classical music to indicate to passers-by that they are no threat to them but on the contrary share their interests and habits.

Think about your own society – where are the positive images of young black men? Even if there are none living nearby, how are they portrayed in video games, on the news, in the papers and the materials you use at school? Compare by contrasting the images of young white men – they are likely to be overwhelmingly positive. You may find a few positive images of young black men in

the fields of entertainment and athletics<sup>7</sup> – are there any in business, law or politics? It is a fact that few black men occupy these higher paying jobs and professional occupations. This is partly because these roles require higher level educational qualifications – data shows that in Britain and in the USA, black men are the least likely of any group to have a degree. In fact, there are twice as many black men in prison than at university.

Why is this? One answer may lie in problems in schools. Studies in the UK indicate black children are discouraged to participate and less praised in the classroom. Expectations for attainment and behaviour are lowered; punishment is disproportionate and discipline more frequent, harsher and for less serious misbehaviour than white pupils. Exclusion is common – black male school children are three times more likely to be excluded than white pupils. This has a long-term consequence – on average, excluded pupils will not do well educationally, are more likely to be unemployed after school and more likely to drift into a life of petty crime and long-term unemployment. In Britain, 50% of young people in a young offender institution had been excluded from school.<sup>8</sup> Exclusion from school is an absolute denial of education and the improved life chances that go with it – racial inequalities in the education system mirror and entrench inequalities in society. This may be the situation elsewhere in Europe – what happens in the schools where you live?

When you think about it, the high rate of exclusion is not surprising – media portrayal of black “street culture” conditions society, including teachers, to expect *less* from black pupils; that they will be worse behaved and more challenging. However committed they may be, only the most aware and self-reflective teachers will be immune to the prejudices swirling through society via the media and politics. The majority of white teachers, lacking close contact with black children, are unlikely to be free from the general racial stereotypes that permeate society about black men – why shouldn’t they see a young black boy as a miniature “gangster rapper” – what alternative images exist? Compare how teachers treat white students who may misbehave or be hostile to the academic environment – you may notice that they are more tolerant.

The consequence of this stigma is therefore serious and not shared by any other group in society. Young black men face actual risks to life, liberty and opportunity caused by the synergy of their race, their age and their gender. They form a discrete group because they are victims of an intersectional discrimination which is qualitatively different from age discrimination alone, race discrimination alone and gender discrimination alone. Michael Brown, Mark Duggan, Oury Jalloh lived and died in different countries – they did not know each other but had these three things in common: they were black, they were male and they were young. In Western society these things put together label them a “risk” to society; however it is perhaps the young black men themselves whose safety and security are at risk! Can you think of another group in this position due to a synergy of multiple attributes? If so, they are victims of intersectional discrimination like Michael, Mark and Oury.

6. K. Barling, “Dying for an Answer”, 2007, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/04/17/kurt\\_bill\\_guns\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/04/17/kurt_bill_guns_feature.shtml)  
7. Hill Collins, 2005, p. 157  
8. John, 2006

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